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Imagine All the People: Advancing a global citizens movement

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD? Those concerned about the dangerous drift of global development are asking this question with increasing urgency. Dominant institutions have proved too timorous or too venal for meeting the environmental and social challenges of our time. Instead, an adequate response requires us to imagine the awakening of a new social actor: a coordinated global citizens movement (GCM) struggling on all fronts toward a just and sustainable planetary civilization. Existing civil society campaigns remain fragmented and therefore powerless to leverage holistic transformation. To create an alternative vision and effective strategy for realizing it, consciousness and action must rise to the level of a GCM. We propose a new organizing campaign with the explicit aim of catalyzing this historic agency. This effort would expand and diversify in a “widening circle”, adapting to changing circumstances as it evolves. From the onset, such a project must foster a politics of trust, committed to balancing unity and pluralism on the road to our common future.

GTI PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL ISSUES

The *Great Transition Initiative* is an international group working for a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being. With this long-term goal as our frame of reference, GTI Perspectives assess pressing near-term policy questions.

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Our Grand Challenge

A decade ago the Earth Charter sounded a clarion call to “join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.” In the years since, the drumbeat of crises that has rippled across the global field – and reports warning of still greater dangers ahead – has underscored this historic imperative to “join together.” The burning question is no longer *if* or *when*, but *how*? What bold actions can forge a world polity for our interdependent world and common future?

The historic underpinning of potential unity lies in the entanglement of people, nature, and generations by long webs of economic, cultural, and environmental connectivity, binding us into one all-embracing social-ecological system. In the Planetary Phase of Civilization, humanity and Earth have become a single community of fate. We are in the midst of a turbulent transition from the world that was to some form of global society, with no exit and no separate solutions for individuals, communities, or countries. The shift is generating a host of ominous transnational problems – climate change and ecosystem degradation, economic instability and geopolitical conflict, oppression and mass migration – that left unattended might well pull us toward a bleak tomorrow.

Nonetheless, we still have time to bypass the future on offer, though it will not be easy. Charting passage to a happier outcome demands rapid emergence of ways of thinking and acting matched to the profound challenge posed by global transition. Our concern and accountability, indeed, our very sense of self, must expand across the barriers of space and time to embrace the whole human family, the ecosphere, and the unborn. We stand at an inflection point of history full of peril, but also promise, if we can come together in a joint venture: creating a culture of solidarity and politics of trust within a movement to build democratic institutions for peace, justice, and sustainability.

Time for a Global Citizens Movement

The popular movements that forged nation-states over the last few centuries developed overarching national identities that encompassed preexisting communities. In the Planetary Phase, we need a still more inclusive form of consciousness and association: a worldwide cultural and political awakening united under the banner Earth. We can observe a foreshadowing of such a movement in the growing chorus of associated citizens calling for a fundamental change of course. Organizations and individuals have worked assiduously across the panoply of environmental and social problems the world faces. The large annual gatherings of the World Social Forum, the worldwide protests against the Iraq War, global movements for social justice and the environment, and coordinated campaigns to influence international policy are the tangible expressions of rising public concern. The world could well be in an even more degraded state without such perseverance.

Still, cause-driven agendas limit the capacity of civil society to address underlying structural drivers of our world-in-crisis, while organizational division undermines its collective influence on the direction of development. Partial and dispersed actions, while laudatory, are insufficient in aggregate to open a new pathway for the global future. In the absence of an overarching vision and strategy, systemic deterioration

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on a larger scale overwhelms painstaking gains in specific locales and on particular issues. The civil society upsurge of recent decades both has paved the way for a more coherent global movement – and highlighted its necessity.

The global transformation will require the awakening of a new social actor: a vast movement of global citizens expressing a supranational identity and building new institutions for a planetary age. Such a global citizens movement (GCM) would work on all fronts, comprehending the various struggles for the environment and justice as different expressions of a common project. The idea and practice of global citizenship is spreading, but a coherent GCM that engages masses of people remains latent, ready to be born. Giving life to this critical actor, now missing from the world stage, stands as the next phase in the evolution of civil society activism.

Rooted in principles elaborated in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Agenda 21, the Earth Charter, the Great Transition, and scores of other documents, a vital GCM would promote a culture of peace and non-violence, nurturing ascendant values of human solidarity, ecological resilience, and quality of life. With adherents united by a shared identity as citizens of a nascent global culture and polity, a GCM would embrace diverse perspectives and movements as separate expressions of a common project.

The GCM is best envisioned as a polycentric political and cultural rising, rather than as a single organized entity. Here we can learn from past movements, such as the civil-rights and labor movements in the USA, which contained multiple organizational forms and diffuse centers of influence, all working toward broadly shared goals. Likewise, the GCM will likely evolve as a complex social ecology of formal and informal associations under an umbrella of shared identity and purpose. The GCM would provide a crucible for creating the vision, trust, and democratic processes underpinning the kind of global society it seeks, an ongoing experiment, exploring ways of acting together on the path toward planetary civilization.

The Widening Circle Strategy

Can the GCM crystallize with sufficient speed and scale? It would be comforting to believe that the necessary coherence will emerge spontaneously, with little proactive direction. But there are hardly guarantees – and misplaced faith in the potential for bottom-up self-organization carries the tragic risk of opportunity lost. Indeed, past movements for systemic change, such as those that forged modern states or struggled for the rights of labor, spawned efforts to consciously weave together disparate grievances and component movements into an overarching formation that spoke for all.

Similarly, unleashing the latent potential for a popular global movement requires a focused and directed effort. Therefore, we propose the launch of a new organizing initiative with the aim of catalyzing a GCM. The great complexity and scope of this task will require sustained effort and an adaptive strategy, a campaign that evolves and spreads across regions and issues in “widening circles”. For shorthand, therefore, we shall refer to this initiative, still unnamed and unformed, as The Widening Circle (TWC). TWC would engage myriad individuals and organizations in articulating a shared planetary consciousness and coordinating actions to elicit public sympathy and influence decision-making.

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To flourish under contemporary conditions, such a project would need to foster a sense of common purpose and promote coordination without compromising the autonomy of its allied organizations. Thus, it would not only respect diversity, but encourage the diverse perspectives necessary to nurture creativity and deepen understanding. Rather than a global monoculture that overrides the specificity of place-based and issue-based efforts, the aim would be to connect people and groups working on a spectrum from local to global in a process of co-creation, always seeking to balance the equally valid principles of pluralism and unity. As it evolves and adapts, TWC’s underlying core mission would persist: to advance a plural and cohesive movement for democratic global governance, justice, and sustainability.

TWC’s lines of activity would include, first, giving voice to the global citizens movement through sophisticated on-line platforms that encourage wide dialogue in the search for solidarity among its geographically dispersed and culturally diverse constituents. Second, TWC would build the knowledge base, assembling relevant scholarship and conducting research to illuminate viable global visions and guide strategies for getting there. Third, TWC would encourage global citizenship through development and dissemination of effective symbols and cultural artifacts. Fourth, TWC would promote apposite actions and campaigns organized by others, while mounting its own initiatives to advance the global citizens movement as an agent of systemic change.

The “widening circle” model anticipates a phased process of organizational development, beginning with a relatively small group of committed people, supported by loose networks of individuals and organizations. While conducting its activities, the initial circle would develop a strategy for expanding to the next circle, a pattern that would continue with each successive phase. In this manner, the organization would pause periodically to evaluate and adjust, reorganizing for a larger circle and enhanced program.

This process would generate an increasingly complex organizational structure, engaging nodes at all scales from the local to the global, and across the broad range of issues. The Widening Circle’s philosophical framework and terms of engagement would be refined iteratively as new circles take ownership of its evolving perspective and organization, always honoring the democratic principles of inclusiveness, participation, subsidiarity, and transparency. At some point, TWC might become indistinguishable from or subsumed in the global citizens movement, or perhaps retain its distinct role as catalyst.

Building and expanding the TWC will require transcending conventional modes of organizing, eschewing the polarized ideological pitfalls of top-down centralization and bottom-up self-organization. The Widening Circle must seek a third way: a political culture that mirrors in practice its understanding of the contemporary world as a dialectical dance between the global whole and the integral parts. This will require the development of internal forms of governance for effectively addressing organizational matters that are irreducibly global, while leaving all else to the deliberation and choice of component entities. Of course, the set of issues deemed of shared global interest will be, no doubt, a matter of political debate and dispute between strong partisans of global unity and equally strong advocates for sub-global autonomy. The degree to which The Widening Circle can evolve an internal culture of trust and

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democracy for resolving such tensions will be a measure of its potential as an agency of transition, indeed, for the very possibility of a livable planetary civilization.

Conclusion

In this century, for better or worse, the long process of social evolution has reached the Planetary Phase, with the shape of the future subject to the ways we respond culturally and politically to the challenge of transition. Prospects for a passage to a decent world rest with the capacity for human consciousness and action to rise to this existential challenge of our moment. There is still time, but the hour grows late.

More than ever, we need the efforts of the past – campaigns for rights, peace, and environment; scientific research on global change; educational and public awareness projects; local efforts to live sustainably. All this is necessary, but not sufficient for the fundamental, systemic shift to a just and sustainable mode of global development. We urgently need, as well, the coalescence of a diverse popular movement of engaged citizens the world over, a movement that weaves together these many themes and projects into a holistic vision and strategy. The global citizens movement would be the self-conscious agency for making the change to a civilization worthy of the name, an answer to the question posed by tremulous lips everywhere: What can I do?

We have put forward The Widening Circle, a new organizing effort to nourish the formation of a movement of global citizens. Rather than a rigid blueprint, TWC’s strategy envisions growing in successive waves, adapting to changing circumstances as it expands and diversifies. Its constants would lie in dedication to a vision of a just and sustainable global society; commitment to a politics of trust, tolerance, and mutual respect; and continual search for ways to balance pluralism and unity on the road to one world with many places.

The time is propitious. Margaret Mead’s famous dictum – “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” – requires a caveat: the moment must be ripe. In our overripe moment, small actions can have large consequences, releasing latent forms of consciousness and political association. With the global citizens movement the key missing actor in the drama of our time, attention must turn now to the work of giving it life. In a spirit of hope and confidence, the time is nigh to act with explicit and proactive intent on behalf of the Earth and all its beings – the role of our lifetime.

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Great Transition Initiative

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While GTI was discussing The Widening Circle strategy introduced in this Perspective, a real-world TWC alliance was formed by leaders of the Earth Charter, The Pachamama Alliance, Transition Towns, the Club of Budapest, Forum for New World Governance, GTI, and several other organizations. In the months ahead, we will be reaching out to others with invitations to step into the circle and widen its reach.

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